

## **Socializing and Self-Representation online: Exploring Facebook**

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### **Abstract**

Blurring boundaries between producers and audiences are widely acknowledged (Bruns, 2005; Jenkins, 2007) Troubling of the distinction between producers and audiences is particularly striking in new media forms, such as social networking sites on the Internet. The role of the audience is no longer solely that of spectator, but now includes producing, spectating and socializing. The social network site Facebook has fast become a popular arena for socializing, and reached a 'critical mass' in Europe and, in the process of socializing participants must construct self-representations. The paper will analyze how the social network institution and the technological features shape the possibilities for socializing and self-representation. The paper will be in three parts, the first part exploring the socialization aspect, the second part exploring the self-representation aspect and the conclusion drawing out some implications of the combined analysis of socializing and self-representation.

The media industry has increasingly recognized the potential in institutionalizing people's desire to be included in communities and to socialize in mediated spaces (Enli and Syvertsen, 2007). Online communities can be placed in a historical line of ideals of a more democratic media production (Brecht, 1979; Enzenberger, 1979; Corner 1994). New media are likewise expected to include more people in the process as producers and not just consumers of the product, through meaning production and digital storytelling.

Social network sites such as Facebook have institutionalized and mediatized personal processes of socializing and display of identity, which traditionally have belonged to the private and non-mediated spheres. These online communities combine features from mass media with features from personal media. The paper will explore the concept of digital friendship, and discuss the arena for socializing and self-representation. How do the users negotiate the hybrid position between being private and being public, with what implications?

In the process of socializing online in Facebook, people construct textual representations. Representations are always mediated by what they consist of; texts, photographs, moving image, pencil drawing, for example, and how they are framed; in a gallery, on a website, on a cinema screen, for example. Of course mediation begins before, and continues well beyond the production and display of 'texts' (Silverstone, 1999; Couldry, 2006; Martin-Barbero, 1993). This paper will address one dimension of the mediation process: the 'processes of textual mediation' (Thumim, 2012, 2009) in order to explore self-representations in Facebook. Self-representation as it is used here points to members of the public representing themselves and thereby affecting an intervention into 'old' media practices whereby the public are represented by media professionals.

Boyd (2007) argues that the cost of the social convergence occurring in social networking sites is a sense of exposure and invasion. The combination of exploring socializing and self-representation allows us to speculate as to possibilities and limitations for self-representation in the infrastructure in Facebook, and how these intersect with users' negotiation of their hybrid position between being in private and being in public.

**Keywords:** Self-Representation, Socializing, Facebook, Social media

## Introduction

It has been argued that historically humans communicate in order to take part and participate in the creation of a collective world (refs Ong 2002; Gripsrud 2006). Within the history of communication, technology has, since the emergence of the Greek writing system, assisted and made human practices more efficient, and created the character of a modern consciousness (Ong 2002). Communication technologies change how we experience, perceive, and understand the surrounding world, as well as ourselves (Thompson 1995). According to John Durham Peters (1999), communication is something we do; human beings are arguably fundamentally social and creative, and thus venues that support the expressive individual and facilitate mediated interpersonal communication are affectionately embraced (Lüders 2007). Socializing via online social media might be understood as a continuation of the letter and postal system, as well as the telephone and its historical social significance (Pool 1997). The introduction of new technologies of communication calls for an elaboration of changing relations and constellations of expressions, and of recognizing the importance of materiality of technology.

The development and take-up of social network media resonates with desires to communicate and connect with others. The term *socializing* means coming into contact with others and exchanging everyday small talk through mediated networks. In these activities, being together and communicating is the most important aspect (e.g. Hjarvard, 2003). The social aspect of broadcast media has famously been termed parasocial because of the one-sided interpersonal involvement of a media user with a program character (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The emergence of digital network technologies has delivered opportunities for two-way communication, enabling new forms of mediated interpersonal communication, as empirical research in this area since the 1990s indicates (e.g. Reingold 1993, Turkle 1997; Lüders 2007). And online communities can be placed in a historical line of ideals of a more democratic media production (Brecht, 1979; Enzenberger, 1979; Corner 1994). However, we argue that *in order* to participate in online social networking, and we take the example of Facebook, individuals have no choice but to represent themselves (Thumim, forthcoming, 2012; Thumim, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. As a result, when taking place in mediated networks, socializing is inextricably entwined with the making of representations of the self. Therefore we propose that understanding social networking requires a theory of self-representation as well as a theory of socializing. And to make sense of online social networking and self-representation, we rely throughout this paper on the concept of mediation.

Drawing on empirical research on *Facebook*, the first part of the paper explores modes of socializing, while the second part considers how self-representation may be shaped in Facebook. Methodologically, we have

conducted textual analysis of selected Facebook postings, and fieldwork in the form of participant observation in the social network site over a period of one year (2008). The paper is an explorative investigation of socializing and self-representation, which proposes directions for further research. Before we present our study of Facebook, we discuss the key concepts of mediation, self-representation and mediated socializing.

### **Mediation and self-representation**

In his 1999 book, *Why Study the Media*, Roger Silverstone argued that media scholars should focus on the processes of mediation rather than on 'the media' (Silverstone, 1999). The concept of mediation foregrounds the *processes* by which meanings are produced, emphasizing that meaning-making is negotiated, open-ended and ongoing and, that it involves institutions, technologies and people (see for example the work of, John Corner 1994; Nick Couldry 2006; Johan Fornas 2000; Jesus Martin-Barbero 1993; Roger Silverstone 1999; and John Thompson, 1995). Deploying the concept of mediation means starting with the assumption that the production, circulation and reception of representations (or indeed the 'practice' of media, as in Couldry's 2004 argument (Couldry, 2004)) always take place in complex and specific contexts, and are *processes* where power is exercised and negotiated. Of course use of the concept mediation makes explicit a recognition of the ways in which media have become embedded in everyday life so that separating out to focus on the media is seen as reductive.

To illustrate what we mean by mediation processes, let's take the example of Facebook. Put crudely mediation in Facebook involves the interaction of the Facebook company and its policies, the developing technological interface (with its accompanying constraints and possibilities) the Facebook user or participants, and the various interactions of these three with each-other and with broader social, cultural, political, economic and technological contexts (including but not limited to those directly concerning media and communication). We could understand this in terms of dimensions of mediation; institutional mediation, textual mediation and cultural mediation (Thumim, forthcoming, 2012; Thumim, 2009).

In this article we purposefully speak of *self-representation* and not *presentation* or *performance* of self. This is an important distinction. Of course in socializing face-to-face people must always be presenting themselves. And there is a great deal of interesting work which transfers this idea to a mediated setting, particularly drawing on Goffman's (1959) work on the presentation of self (e.g. Livingstone 2008). Scholars have pointed out the problems in trying to maintain a clear distinction between the self online and the

mediated self, (Livingstone, 2008; Silverstone 2006) and these 'borders' are clearly porous.

Nevertheless we contend that the blurring of the online and offline does not remove the requirement to address circulating symbolic forms, that is, representations. We suggest that a focus on self-representation complements work on the presentation and performance of self. The concept of self-representation privileges a different set of questions and draws on a different literature than do these concepts – that of mediated representation.

We argue that it is important not to elide the differences between the notion of presentation and representation, but rather, in addition to the growing body of work that explores presentation of self online and offline and the relations between the two, we also need to think specifically about the notion of a *representation* in the context of online socializing because *texts are being made*, however ephemeral they may be. The notion of a *self-representation* focuses on the symbolic forms created and then circulating – linking it to the field of work on representation in media of, for example women, 'ordinary people', or the colonial subject.

## **Representation**

John Corner, writing about documentary, described what he called '*a strategy of representation*':

Out of the range of possible kinds of reality open to documentary treatment, a topic is chosen as the subject of a film or programme. But how will this topic be depicted in particular images and sounds? The initial decision here concerns what to film, whom to film, and what kinds of sound (including speech) to record. No matter whether the topic is an abstract one (for example, loneliness in student communities) or a physically grounded one (for example the problem of heavy traffic in rural areas), *a strategy of representation and visualization* is required (Corner, 1995: 79) (italics in original).

Also on the subject of representation, the film studies scholar, Tessa Perkins, noted that:

..films, along with other forms of representation, play an important role in forming ideas about, and attitudes to, the world, in alleviating anxiety and even in diffusing conflict – in short, they do do political work (Perkins, 2000: 76).

Given both of these observations – that in the making of a media text ‘a strategy of representation’ necessarily takes place and, that representations are always political, it becomes obvious that it is politically important to address the mediation of the *self*-representations that are proliferating as part of the boom in online socializing. And in the making of self-representations there must always be choices (‘strategies’ in Corner’s terms) about what aspects of the self to represent and how to represent them.

### **Mediated socializing**

Facebook is a typical easy-to-use service, in line with Blogger, MySpace, Flickr and You Tube, which results in a low threshold for participation and socializing in the social network. The intuitive interface is widely seen as a key reason for the fast global spread; Facebook is the dominant social networking site across most of the globe and the company are still expanding. The Hollywood movie *Social Network* (2010) is a portrayal of the innovation process leading to Facebook, and the movie’s huge popularity has underscored the importance of Facebook as a communicative tool in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The immediate user-friendliness is a key success factor explaining the fast global spread of Facebook as a social network site. Previously, blogs and homepages had been used by the technologically savvy, and required more than average digital literacy. The democratization of online presence is however also a commercialization or socialization, and Facebook is based on a business model of ‘social ads’ (Keen 2007), and the company has recently been valued at \$ 15bn. The technological development of digital tools and the emergence of easy to use digital venues for creating and sharing personal expressions appear to motivate certain practices. In social network sites (SNS, sometimes called social networking sites, see Beer 2008 for a discussion of the two terms), such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo, users create self-descriptive profiles that display social connections (see e.g. Donath and boyd 2004). The Internet scholar dana boyd has examined user-practices, and by focusing on the performance of self, identified how online socializing is tightly related to offline contexts (boyd and Heer 2006). According to Nicole Ellison et al. (2006), communication in Facebook has real life social outcomes, and even though a casual link could not be argued, the study identified a correlation between Facebook use and processes of bonding, bridging, and maintenance of previous social connections. Accordingly, Facebook might be understood as a hybrid space that challenges the traditional distinctions such as offline and online, and private and public.

First, the dichotomy between online and offline socializing seems relatively pragmatic and easy to categorize, either you meet people face-to-face, or you chat in an online space. Still, this common sense

understanding might no longer be adequate, and according to David Beer (2008), social network sites are increasingly moving into the cultural mainstream, and 'the everyday sense' of friend can now often mean an online friend. Beer thus criticizes Boyd and Ellison (2007) for ignoring the recursive nature of these processes as online socializing becomes mundane and the version of friendship they offer begins to remediate and shape the understandings of friendship more generally: "(...) we cannot think of friendship on SNS as entirely different or disconnected from our actual friends or notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by connections they make on SMS". Friendship might change as it interfaces with new technology and should not be understood as historically fixed or stable, and according to sociological studies of friendship (e.g. Pahl 2000). Based on these perspectives, Beer (2008:521) argues that separating out offline from online, even if we think of them as 'entwined' seems to take us away from understandings of online socializing as a defining and integral part of how people live: "These mobile, locative and integrated technologies lead to an increasingly mediated way of life with little if any unmediated room outside". Facebook is a typical example of a social network site that is based on integrating mundane information through uploading photos, status updates, and posting information about what they are 'doing right now'.

Second, the distinction between private and public aspects are continuously negotiated and disputed, and are constantly influenced by the way people interact, with or without new communication technologies (Rasmussen 1996). According to Barkadjieva (2005:181), the dichotomy public/private is false, because there is no critical point where online activities can be defined as private as opposed to public, yet there are differences in the intimacy experienced between social actors. The private and the public have historically been intertwined, and even Habermas (1989:366) conceived the bourgeois public sphere to be made up of private people coming together and described public and private spheres as 'interlinked'. More recently, Bauman (2000) has pinpointed a redefinition of the public sphere; a scene on which private dramas and personal confessions are staged, put into public display and publicly watched (2000:70). Facebook could be understood as a public sphere where individual users contribute with private postings and through their activities negotiate the degree of intimacy.

A third aspect of Facebook and similar social network sites is the combining of mass communication and personal communication. Convergence between mass media and personal media has resulted in blurred boundaries between one-way communication and two-way communication. Facebook is typical of new media that combine features from personal and broadcast media. For example the status update function is a tool to broadcast a personal message from one to many. The possibility to reach all your Facebook-

friends with one single message has similarities with traditional broadcasting, and is different from personal one-to-one communication tools such as letters and telephone. The Facebook users are however different from the broadcasting audience in the sense that they combine the roles as producers and user/audiences of content. In contrast, the audiences/users in online social networks are identified as 'friends' with their own profiles and online presence. Facebook allows for strategic sharing of content, dividing friends in categories, provided with different levels of access to your postings. Accordingly, it is possible to divide your friends into audience segments, and decide what kind of postings they are allowed to view. However, this management of the online socializing requires administration and a degree of technical skills, or literacy, and many Facebook users will thus publish their postings as open to all their friends. As a result, the postings will have a form and a character that the users are comfortable with presenting to their Facebook friends. Most often these 'friends' are not overlapping with the notion of 'friends' in the everyday sense, because the Facebook friendship also includes 'weak ties'; colleagues, distant relatives, former high school friends, acquaintances etc. This inclusive notion of the term 'friend' is integrated in the logics of Facebook socializing, even though there are different approaches to this logic, perhaps, as Beer argues altering what 'friend' means today (Beer, 2008). On the one hand, a Facebook profile with many 'friends' signals popularity, and involves a degree of social status, particularly among young people and celebrities. On the other hand, there is room for people to define their own, preferred boundaries to a 'friend'; one might operate a restrictive understanding of the term relying on criteria for who is entitled to be added as friends.

### **Socializing in the global village**

The social network site Facebook emerges as profoundly hybrid along the parameters of offline versus online, private versus public, and broadcast versus personal communication. This is particularly evident in the status field update, which provides the facebook user an opportunity to communicate a brief message to 'mass' audience (their friends) by use of a personal media device. The users are in theory free to design their status update field as they wish, and there are no formal editorial constraints on what to publish in the status fields. The editors are the fellow Facebook-users in the sense that they are invited to 'like' a status update or to 'comment' on the status update. In some cases the users are also invited to 'report this' if they find a comment or an update inappropriate. This might be regarded as a distribution of editorial power compared to traditional mass media, but as we shall see, the online arena for socializing are nevertheless not free of constraints.

Let's consider one particular moment of in history: Candidate Barack Obama's victory in the US President election 2009. This was a global event in the sense that people all over the world had been engaged in the election campaign in the USA, and that many nations are effected by American politics and the decision-making in the USA. This global interest in the US election was indeed reflected in the hybrid public sphere Facebook. The blurring boundaries between private engagement and public debate were prominent in the status updates commenting on the Obama's victory. The Facebook debates linked the personal experience to the global political event, and made it possible for the users to express their personal opinions in relation to the mass media coverage of the event. As an example Facebook socializing, we find that Norwegian Facebook updates after Obama's victory on November 5th 2009 was dominated by support for Obama, and users typically expressed a joint happiness and positive comments to the outcome of the US election. As such, local Facebook status updates immediately reflected the global media event, and users embraced the opportunity to communicate their feelings and opinions. The users express themselves about the Obama and his promise of 'change' in US politics, and thus feel included in a global political event. Socializing on Facebook can thus be regarded as an arena for combining features from personal communication and mass communication. To a degree, this focus on international politics demonstrates that socializing on Facebook enables connecting to world events as well as more local events, and the opportunity to experience an inclusion in a collective of world citizens. In line with the general media coverage in Norway, the postings on Obama's victory generally expressed joy and relief about the outcome of this political drama. The global infrastructure of Facebook makes it possible to at least potentially be included in a global community.

Facebook is available in over 40 different languages, and is profoundly global in its structure as opposed to national media, such as newspapers and nationwide broadcasters. Thus the technological infrastructure connects with both national and global communities, though of course the reality of people's online social worlds varies; some people will develop more international networks than others. For example, empirical sociological research indicates the prevalence of class inequality and the fixity of certain communities, such as the white working class in England (Skeggs 2004). Since, as we have argued above, online and offline worlds are interconnected, it is likely that less international offline worlds are also less international and cosmopolitan online as well; affecting what kinds of networks people are socializing in.

A key feature of Facebook is the mixture of a local or national context and a global context, and the users people typically express themselves in a mixture of mother tongue and international languages (mostly English). Consequently, social media does not relate to the territorial borders of nations and states as traditional mass media, because the nexus of friendship and the links between them are based on a



different logic than national or local media. While a nation might be an 'imagined community', as described by Benedict Anderson (2006, new ed.), the nexus of friends in a social network sites such as Facebook, is an online community based on social relationships rather than geographical territories. General tendencies in post-modern societies such as individualization and globalization are reflected in the practices and user-patterns in social network sites; an individual user might have contacts in their friend-list that exceeds traditional social and national borders in their home environment. As a result, a Norwegian user might in some cases switch to English in order to reach their international Facebook friends, but also, another motivation could be to signalize a global lifestyle and a multi-lingual capacity. Taking the status updates commenting on Obama's victory as an example, they were generally written in English, even though there are all Norwegians. An obvious explanation is the US origin of the news story they are commenting on and that the campaign included English phrases and easy-to-pick-up rhetoric such as 'Change' and 'Yes We Can'. Moreover, the expressions of happiness about the outcome of the election also signalizes that the Facebook users has a desire to engage in international politics and in a sense be included in a global community.

### **Practices and degrees of disclosure in online socializing**

In the article "Theorizing Media as Practice", Nick Couldry (2004) explores the possibility of a new paradigm of media research that understands media, not as texts or structures of production, but as practice. As pointed out by Couldry (2004) ritual practices are important ways in which the legitimacy of assumed wider values might be confirmed or communicated. Ritual practices are able to "frame" and reproduce values and our sense of the social (Couldry 2004:127). Socializing in Facebook can be understood as a media-centered practice, but also a practice that anchor other practices, by for example being a point of reference in real – life conversations (e.g. I saw on Face book that you recently visited Spain. How was it?" or "I read on your profile that you have been ill with swine flue. Are you recovered?"). The status updates on Facebook provides material for everyday small talk and gossip, as well as more serious discussions. A survey about how young people in Norway uses social network sites (mostly Facebook) demonstrated a ritual character of the user-pattern; they use Facebook regularly and several times a day, but mostly in brief sequences (Storsul et al. 2008). Moreover, the survey identified the young Facebook users as nomads who emigrate from one social network site to another in groups, but still Facebook has been surprisingly stable in the position as the most popular social network site (Storsul et al. 2008). Even though there are signs that young people have started to escape from Facebook to get away from their elderly relatives, Facebook is stil by far the number one online social netweok site among young peoplee in the UK and Norway. The fact that Facebook, during recent years, has become an integrated part of peoples everyday socializing makes it

relevant to investigate their practices, and their degree of personal disclosure.

Following from the inconsistent character of online socializing noted above, it is clear that identifying patterns of user practice is a challenging task, and the following attempt to categorize approaches to social disclosure in Facebook should be understood as overlapping, fluid and tentative. In other words, the categories are not fixed because, crucially, a Facebook user will often transfer between them, so the categories refer to practices, and not to specific users. Moreover, the categories in no way claim a complete overview of socializing and exposure arguably the extent of Facebook penetration and use globally would make such general claims highly problematic - Facebook is likely to be different things to different people in different contexts and our findings here should be taken as adding to cumulative knowledge through qualitative work on social networking. The socializing via the status update fields a key tool in online socializing in Facebook' in our sample of Facebook users nevertheless indicates certain patterns of practice and we have identified three categories of practice in Facebook based on studying status fields update over 12 months: *the reluctant practice*, *the sharing practice*, and *the promotional practice*.

*The reluctant practice* is recognized as a user practice that reveals a minimum of private information. Private disclosure is avoided by providing more mundane information, and the level of sharing is comparable to the information one would provide to total strangers or distant acquaintances. Typically these status updates reports on where the user is located physically are at the moment or what they practically are doing, such as " I am @ work". These postings are informative, but not private or intimate, and the socializing does not include sharing of any sensitive information and or revealing information about the user.

A second, and diametrically opposite, practice can be described as *the sharing practice*, implying a liberal approach to communicating even relatively intimate, emotional and private information. The degree of private disclosure and confessions varies within this category, and the most common is that the shared information indirectly reveals a personal characteristic or emotion, but seldom the whole picture and the most intimate details. An example is the messages such as: "I am tired of never falling asleep!!!!". Such messages are typically a private confessions or emotional disclosure. People might use their status updates to inform about their private life, including personal weaknesses and mistakes, and thus invite their online friends to engage in a more private and personal conversation.

A third practice can be termed *the promotional practice*, and placed in between the two other categories along a continuum, including elements of both reluctance and sharing. These status updates share only

information that bring the user in a good light, meaning that the users serve as their own PR-agents.. This practice is found in the sample screen shot, not least in the profile pictures and the use of English language in the updates in order to signalize and promote an international lifestyle. This practice reveals a highly conscious approach towards the risky elements of sharing information with your Facebook-friends, but also the potential benefits from sharing exactly the right information at the right time. This practice however, does have significant drawbacks because of the social structure and the collaborative nature of the social network site, and an obvious difficulty of using Facebook as a PR-tool is that you have little or no control over the kind of material that are posted by other people even if it includes information and pictures of you. One's Facebook friends might post information that contradicts the digital persona oneself is attempting to promote.

The three practices of socializing practice highlight a dilemma central to online social network environments, namely how can one control one's representation whilst participating in online socializing. The ethical ideal of 'informed consent' is not realistic in a share-based online community, given the practice that people will post pictures of other people as a part of socializing online, and sharing their moments through storytelling and pictures. Thus an additional rationale for being present on Facebook might be to ensure that you yourself contribute to the creation of your online persona. The relation between the self-representation and the collective representation of individuals is particularly illuminated in the context of online socializing such as Facebook. As shown in the three practices of Facebook, socializing requires a certain degree of self-representation.

### **Self-representation in online socializing**

Self-representation is not the stated purpose of Facebook; the terms 'social media' and 'social network sites' emphasize the socializing aspect of the online arena. However, as we have begun to argue self-representation is a necessary part of online socializing. Self-representation becomes more complicated and perhaps more urgently requires our attention precisely when representing oneself is not the stated primary objective.

Users of Facebook are likely to say their main aim is to socialize (and not to fulfill a burning desire to represent themselves). Nevertheless, in order to participate in the *practice* of Facebook, participants must construct self-representations. Indeed as we noted above, one reason for taking part in Facebook might be to ensure that one at least contributes to the creation of one's online presence; the individual being always dependent on the practices (and representations) of others. And these constructed self-representation must (unavoidably) employ 'a strategy of representation', in Corner's terms, however short-lived that may be.

If we insist of thinking about self-representation in Facebook within the wider contexts in which it is practiced (Couldry), clearly exploring socializing and self-representation unavoidably highlights power dynamics in dominant mass media representation as well as life beyond representation. We will give three illustrations of how mediated self-representation in Facebook raises, or links into key debates in Media Studies and Sociology: First, the individualized global self, second, self-representation and dominant representation, three, controlling your representation.

### **Individualized global self**

When an individual wants to socialize in Facebook they post images of themselves, stories of their mood, their opinion, their feelings, onto the Facebook site, in so doing they are conforming to the generic expectations of the self-representation in Facebook. And Facebook is a website designed to elicit certain responses; that is certain kinds of representation. When our images are posted there they take on the Facebook brand, which provides the gallery space, if you will, for photographs, thoughts and so forth. Thus perhaps one of the most striking features of mediated self-representation in Facebook is the focus on the individual self, which of course follows a trajectory discussed above that has taken place in, for example, the Access movement and documentary making more widely. Stories of the self have always been told (think of diaries, letters, the history of family photography) but in Facebook (and of course FB is one example of social networking), these practices are in the service of socializing, networking, staying in touch. What kind of photograph of yourself do you post; which image represents you, today, in this mood, at this moment, how are you *feeling? Individually*. Even the most professional images look snapshot like, 'amateur' here because of the overbearing frame. Clearly the widely argued individualization thesis becomes relevant here, as well as its' critiques (eg: Beck 1992; Giddens 1991, Savage 2000, Skeggs 2004). The individualization thesis suggests the rise of individuals in a globalised world means the decline of older

forms of social categorization and identification. While other sociologists argue that this theory actually serves to normalize a particular world view and deny the experience of those who are not mobile, global selves (Skeggs, 2004).

There are of course opportunities to bring all aspects of the individualized self into this online space; so when the individual identifies with a politics then politics can be present. Thus the 'group' *Get the Fascist BNP off Facebook* - is a good example (as is the BNP being on Facebook in the first place for that matter). This 'group' is listed under a hyperlink:

'Common Interest – Beliefs and Causes'

Thus in this framing, group politics emerges from, and belongs to, individual Beliefs and Causes (a subsection of Common Interest). Another group in this section is entitled 'I flip my pillow over to get to the cold side'. Thus in the Facebook framing anti-fascist politics is equal to what you do with your pillow in bed – a matter of personal, individual taste as to whether it matters or whether it is a joke, not a group cause for action. Similarly, the expressions about Obama's candidacy discussed in the early part of this paper can also be read as delivering a particular type of self-representation. The architecture of Facebook, the status update in this case, encourages expressions of individual feeling in not more than two sentences, and hence reaction to the election in this illustration comes across as a collection of individual feelings. (Though we do note Facebook and, probably more, other networking sites may be used to build offline political actions).

### **Self-representation and dominant representation**

As we have suggested, the commonsense assumption is that Facebook is primarily a tool for socializing and yet profile pictures do largely consist of amateur portrait snaps and the website is set up explicitly to upload and 'share' photos of 'me'. This means creating representations of 'me'. And it is only once we think about the self representation that must take place when people socialize in Facebook, that we are able to address the important question of how these representations interact with dominant media representations: do they challenge them, uphold them, alter them, for example? As Van Zoonen noted in 2001, the concerns for feminist work in the offline / 'old media' context, continue online; a major one of

these concerning questions of representation. Thus for example, we should explore gendered self-representation in Facebook – how, for example do self-representations challenge, conform to, or otherwise enter into conversation with dominant representations of girls and women? (Negra, 2008) On Facebook we can find self-representations that repeat and concur with dominant gender representations; for example young women representing themselves in soft porn poses on their own Facebook page. But we can also find a whole range of others. Clearly this is not a question of regressive mainstream representation versus progressive self-representation. But we should urgently ask what are the speaking positions made possible and what is difficult to be or say, be or do, in a representation in the Facebook space.

### **Controlling your representation.**

In the context of the social space of Facebook, the *practice of self-representation* faces particular challenges. First, you may be unable to control your own representations as they proliferate change and are changed by others (see also Livingstone 2008). The collective creation of our persona to a degree make us vulnerable to other peoples portrayals of us. At the same time online socializing provides opportunities to experiment and play with the practice of self-representation. What is clear is that socializing and representing oneself in Facebook requires media literacy, media literacy can help to deliver power and control over your own representation, and this is arguably one of the reasons for its increasing centrality in media and communication in the era of digital ('social') media (eg Livingstone, Van Couvering and Thumim 2008; Silverstone, 2007). How media literate do you need to be in order to know what you uploaded and what you didn't and what you can turn off and what you can't and who is representing you as part of their own self-representation? This is a different lack of control from the loss of control when a reality television programme or a documentary is made about you, when media producers film and edit and display your representation, for example. However, the fact that questions of media literacy come into play regarding controlling one's own self-representation, suggests that socializing in digital media spaces like Facebook leads to a new set of limits and problems from those identified as problematic in traditional mass media around the ability to represent oneself and to deploy, in Corner's terms, a strategy of representation. Meanwhile, older issues of representation, as something that is controlled by media institutions, corporations and professionals, have by no means disappeared. In digital spaces like Facebook the institutional power might be more hidden and (apparently) more open for negotiations with the users. However, the commercial interests always lurk in the background, reminding us that we are witnessing new versions of old problems with regards to the issue of representation.

**Conclusions: Socializing and self-representation**

We have argued in this paper that we need to reconsider socializing in Facebook because socializing requires textual self-representation. We are offered an online device. Everybody is 'included' in this easy-to-use device and seemingly 'everybody' is there. The device seems like a socializing heaven with manifold opportunities to (re)connect. We are served with a socializing tool on a silver platter. The only thing required of us is that we follow the instructions and fill out the empty spaces. We describe ourselves in the language offered by Facebook. We select our profile picture. We provide personal information about ourself (in the degree we find comfortable). We represent ourselves using the language and frameworks of Facebook. Of course we can protest against the standard by wittiness, playing with the 'format', showing that we are critical. We can sabotage the device by posting someone else's image as our profile picture and a fake name, we can decide to represent ourselves by other kinds of images, of our pets, of a view, of our family. But we can't escape making some kind of self-representation. We want to connect, therefore we must represent ourselves. If this is the case then exploring the mediation of self-representation in social networking is an important edition to the exploration of how socializing itself is being transformed online.

The discussions in this paper have pointed out many directions of research, both the practices of the users, and the constraints of the (commercial) infrastructure. The challenges of sampling are of course immense, and the enormity of Facebook means that sampling decisions structure - perhaps more than ever - what the researcher is able to find. But this is a call for work on representation to extend to online socializing, for the self-representation landscape extends into that arena.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The idea that self-representation is a necessary part of socialising online is developed in Thumim, N (forthcoming, 2012) *Self-representation and digital culture*.